TOLSTAIA KAPORTA



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Tulubaikaporia

Episode 7: about psychophysiological responses to bus time dilation

nova-nevedoma.com/bus-time-dilation/

> "I considered it desirable that he should know nothing about me but it was even better if he knew several things which were quite wrong." —— "The Third Policeman" by Flann O'Brien

We stand, we wait and wait and wait and

and wait and wait and wait

time and time and time and

Around, stretching into infinity, the oats glisten, trillions of spikelets rustling in the breeze, summerly warm. Instead of the horizon, ahead — oats, to the left — oats, to the right — you would never guess, but there's more oats. The oat stalks used to seem taller to me; now they reach at most to the chest. A child could lose the way in them even if walking straight, but we, like all normal children, never walked straight. In autumn, after the harvest, the straw was rolled into bales and wrapped with thick white plastic strings. We cut them, tore apart the bales, and built forts and castles from the straw. After improvised day-long wars in such castles, we would return home itchy, scratched bloody, the straw falling everywhere from beneath our clothes.

— Yesterday, there was a fire in the field, — says the old man standing next to me. He wears a life-worn blue "New York" cap, sweat pouring from beneath it down his bald head. — A couple of hectares, they say, burnt down. Terrible.

— Eh? — asks the full-bodied woman next to him, wearing black sunglasses and holding an open newspaper. She reads it from time to time when her hands become tired of using it as a parasol.

— Terrible, I'm tellinn thee, — says the old man.

— A real nightmare, indeed, — says the woman.

— It ignited by itself, they say, — the old man mutters, wiping sweat from his forehead.

— No wonder. With such heat, I might ignite by myself as well. Oof! — says the woman, starting to use the newspaper as a fan.

— Drought, they say. Everywhere.

— That's for sure. Everywhere.

— But thing is, love, we have a drought every year 'round here, heat like this every year, as long as I can remember, but everything is on fire only this year. Coincidence? Don't think so.

— It burnt in the past too, in other places. I remember the news.

— It doesn't just ignite by itself, does it, love?

— Oh, it does, look at the sky and how it's blazing up there. Although no, don't look, it'll burn your eyes out.

The road is dusty, asphaltless, cracked. Though, calling it a road is a bit of a stretch. You need to know it's a road, then maybe you'll find it; otherwise, it's just a large path through the field. Above the scorched surface, the wind chases mirages. You can see the air melting; look closer — and you feel your brain melting, too. The sky is not even blue, but sheet-white. From the sun, scorching halos spread across it like ripples on water. If I were alone, I'd have taken off my shirt long ago, but as it is... eh, don't want to embarrass myself in the polite society of decent people. Not in the best shape, I am.

— They say their machines are powered by clouds, — says the old man.

— On the telly.

— Whose?

— Mine, of course. Every other telly, too. One TV channel we have after all.

— Whose machines?

— Doesn't tha watch the news?

— What about them?

— Doesn't tha know what people are sayinn?

— All sorts of things nowadays, apparently, aren't they?

— Aye, right tha is, love.

— And so what? What's with the clouds?

— So, they suck the clouds, and — as a consequence, tha might imagine — now there's nowhere to hide from the sun.

— Who? People? Don't be daft, you.

— Not people. People! Oh, love. Not only people. Doesn't tha know anything of what's happeninn 'round the world?

— Who then? Robots?

— Aye? Robots! Mayhaps robots, too. Science fiction and all the bloody drebbeden people're readinn these days. Cassandra me arse, nobody believes nowt until they're roasted alive.

— Who then, mind you?

The old man lowers his voice, saying:

— The same who set fields on fire.

— Is that so? And why would they do that?

— So we'd have nowt to eat! — the old man spreads his hands in the utter state of obviousness.

— You eat porridge every day, do you?

— The oats?

— The oats.

— Aye, every morning. All my potato tops've dried up, too. Bloody 'ell.

— Well, you should water them. Take a hose and water them. And don't eat potato tops, perhaps.

— Water or not — same result.

— Won't make them tastier, indeed.

As my group theory professor used to say, true learning ought to be

painful, akin to muscle soreness. It must be felt. If you don't feel it, you're not learning; you're merely warming a seat. Patience, too, is a skill. Few of us know, but scholars distinguish between two types of waiting: scheduled and unscheduled. The only difference between them is that with the former you know when the awaited event is supposed to occur, yet both are equally repulsive and unnatural to a human brain. Take, for instance, the bus to Tulubaika. It supposedly runs on a timetable, hence, having arrived early, I found myself immersed in the first type of waiting; time seemed to hasten slightly, and the sensation was rather pleasant — I was heading home, where my family waited for me, bustling about, my mother would be baking pasties (with cabbage, egg and rice, mince, and marmalade from orange peels and gooseberries), my grandfather would be smoking some meat, beef, or pork (or perhaps fish, for he's quite an angler, Tulubaika's quite a river — perfect combination), my niece — perhaps with my sister's help — would be drawing me something rather lovely, and their new dog (which I've only seen on Instagram) would be preparing its fluffy tail for vigorous wagging upon meeting me, and also (importantly so) our old cat would be asleep, indifferent to my arrival, preoccupied with its own affairs and priorities, absolutely nonhuman and inhuman. Thusly, you wait, agitated, trembling with anticipation, like on the eve of your sixth birthday, only for the bus to fail to arrive on time, turning waiting from an exhilarating process into a suffocating one. Time, probably realising how unbound it can be, begins to swirl and torment you, passing with different speed at different moments, in different places. The ecstatic excitement morphs into anxiety corrosive to nerves. What

if the bus doesn't come at all? What then? My family would be disheartened, the pies would go cold, the dog, tired, would lie down to sleep next to the cat, the house would be shuttered, the stove extinguished, and the lights and telly turned off, the village bulldozed away. The prodigal son promised to visit once in a decade but did not. What would the neighbours say? What a deceiver those Tulubayevs raised! Bad parenting, terrible one. Every few minutes (there's no set interval here, for it could be a minute, five, or ten; time in the brain is such: it speeds up, slows down, writhes before you like an uneven sine wave), you pull out your overheating phone, check the clock over and over. Then, realising the battery is about to die, or the phone might as well ignite itself, you start counting seconds in your head, your breaths in and breaths out, listening to the wind and the rustle of oat stalks. Meditation, they say, is good for you. It helps train your waiting muscle for that very nothing or something that never quite happens. Thislike is the face of nothing, nontime, nonhappening:

— Why do you look for enemies everywhere, old chap? — asks the woman.

— I'm not lookinn for 'em, love. They find me. You can't hide from 'em. They've got the whole Earth in the palm of their hand. Like this, — says the old man and shows his calloused palm with his fingers sprawling.

— No one cares about us or our village, don't you worry. We're not even marked on the map.

— That's just it. Truth, that. A dire situation, in fact. Do whatever they want to us — drop a bomb, poison us with gas, burn us with lasers — no one would even notice. But they've chosen a more elegant approach.

— And what's that, mind you?

— Told thee, didn't I? They've sucked out the clouds, stoked up the sun, and now they're smokinn us! How it used to be: tha steps out at dawn, faces the sun, closes thy eyes, basks in its warmth, sits down in a garden chair, sips thy cuppa with a biscuit, then off to work tha goes, aye? The sun is blazinn but feels good, warming the soul, so to speak, because tha knows that in the evening it will proper pour with rain, waterinn the vegetable garden and all other household plots. But now,

how is it? Can't step outside; impossible! Step out of the shade and it roasts thee right quick — first a tan, then burns and blisters if tha's daft enough, and before tha knows it, skin cancer and tha's six feet under. That's their plan, tha sees. I knew an old chap — another one, not me — a revered fella, he was 108 years old, that bloody bastard, runninn 'round like a little lad, drinkinn vodka like a bloody elephant, but this year... this year he died. Just like that. In his sleep, they say, but I know that he was sun-struck the day before, love.

The woman shrugs.

— So it goes. Slowly but surely, we'll all perish one by one, and as tha said, love, no one will notice. We're not even in a footnote on the map!

— You know, — I say out of boredom, — what if this is some sort of social experiment?

— Antisocial, — says the woman.

— Might be antisocial, that's not to be ruled out. Or parasocial.

— Like how, mind you?

— The lad's got a point. This's how it happens: they test it on us first, on Tulubaika, because no one cares, then on the whole country, and then on the entire planet. And then... we're kirdyk[1]. Write us off. That's why our role in this is tremendous. We must fight however we can. We must resist. Now, I'll go stretch my legs; bloody 'ell they've gone proper numb from standing still. And those people, they sit all day!

The old man straightens up, adjusts his cap, and starts to walk in a figure-of-eight along the road. He barely lifts his feet, causing a cloud of road dust to rise with every shuffle of his soles.

— Have you been away for long? — asks a voice from behind.

That dialogue seemed over, everyone had gone quiet, it was time to breathe out and think my thoughts, so hearing that voice, a gentle young woman's voice, I'm startled.

— Oh, sorry for scaring you.

I turn around — before me stands a young woman with fiery ginger hair tied back in a ponytail. She's wearing a white cotton dress with sweat stains showing at the chest and underarms. The hem, reaching to her knees, is covered in dust. Between her collarbones, she has a piercing, a golden sun with eight rays, resembling tongues.

— Am I distracting?

Nerves heating up, I shake my head. Where did she come from? She must have just arrived, silently, like a mouse.

— You're not distracting, quite the opposite. What's here to be distracted from?

— From enjoying the majesty of summer. Isn't that wonderful?

No, it's not. But I don't say that. I'm trying to maintain communication

here, civilised dialogue between two adults. Small talk.

— And why do you think I've been here before? Do I look like a local?

— Oh, stop it. No one's here for the first time.

— How's that?

— Well, just like that, simple. You can be born here, leave here, and then return. That particular chain of events must happen. No one in their right mind would come here for the first time on purpose. No one can, really. You're aware, I assume, that tourism isn't exactly booming around these parts.

— It's not.

— So, how long has it been?

— Since I finished school. And you?

— I haven't left. I live here.

— In Tulubaika?

— Well, not in the field, obviously?

— Who knows... And how is it now, in Tulubaika?

— Quite wonderful. I'd even say delightful. Summer, heat, the river, flowers, berries. But most importantly — look how Sollie shines. Ah!

The word “Sollie,” spoken with a capital letter, sounded clear, deep, with respect, as believers would say “Goddie”.[2] As she says that and exhales, the expression on her face acquires blissful qualities.

— Bright it is, — I say.

— Very, but such is life. Without Sollie, it would be the eternal night, wouldn’t it?

I don’t quite know how to respond. Probably, yes — it would be. It’s dark without the sun, that’s for sure. I can’t really disagree nor do I want to agree. Why would anyone agree with something so obvious? And that would make me submissive, wouldn’t it? Is it a rhetorical trick? It must be.

Thus we stand, in silence, looking at each other. Awkward. But not embarrassing. Yet. Awkward is better than embarrassing. I squeeze a shy wry nervous smile.

— By the way, I’m a teacher, — she says.

— Oh, good for you, — I reply.

— It is, yes.

— Must be difficult.

— What?

— Teaching. Children these days, you know.

— What's with them children?

— Everyone's on their phones. TikTok, you know.

She's perplexed by my anachronistic fathers-and-sons-ness, quite unsure which side I'm on in that grand conflict (the Grand Conflict).

— You don't look old. How old are you?

— I prefer not to disclose.

— You look young.

— Well, thank you.

— And what do you do?

— It's dull. I'm into... computers.

— Oh, staring at a screen all day?

— Kind of.

— Can you fix my printer?

— What?

— Just kidding, I can fix my printer myself, — she says with a smile. — And Windows, I know how to install it.

— Good for you.

— It is, yes. A programmer, I reckon?

— Kind of.

— What do you program? You know, there are all sorts of programmers these days.

— It's difficult to explain.

— Try me. I'm not some country bumpkin, am I?

— Well... Clouds.

The young woman frowns and examines me like a teacher would. I feel her gaze even through my black sunglasses.

— Very funny.

— No, I'm not taking a piss. I do program clouds, for real. Have you heard of such a thing?

— And why would you do that?

— To make them rain.

The teacher's expression darkens.

— I see. So that Sollie shines less.

— No, why? So that it rains. It has nothing to do with "Sollie".

— To each their own. And is it difficult to live with that?

Live with what? What kind of question is that?

— Not particularly. It pays well.

— I see.

She seems to be disappointed in who I am and what I do. That doesn't surprise me. People here often think programmers are new kulaks and have to be liquidated.[3]

I feel the sun furiously reaching its zenith, taking out a magnifying glass, and beginning to shine directly through it, as if it's a year-five pupil and we are ants — the battle uneven, the fate unenviable. I wish I could program up some clouds now. Docker compose up etm.[4]

From afar comes the roar of an engine of hell knows not what. The sound grows louder. Hearing it, the old man steps off the road. A few seconds later, a motorcyclist speeds past us, a young man with a pink mohawk, helmetless. Mixing with the black exhaust fumes (or rather an atrocious gas), a cloud of dust rises from the irritated earth, envelops the bus stop and sneaks into our nostrils. Everyone starts sneezing and coughing. Come to my senses, I do. It smells of dust, straw, engine emissions, tedium, and the colour white.

— They go buyinn 'em drandulets[5], fuckinn degenerates! — says the babushka sitting on the dry grass. She wears a headscarf. Few know that, but scholars discovered that all babushkas wear headscarves — it's like a

mohawk for punks, an element of subculture. Without it, a babushka simply isn't accepted as one and can remain forever young. When I arrived, N hours ago, she was already sitting here and has been silent until this moment, so I've forgotten about her existence and not mentioned her in my story, just like many of us often forget about many babushkas and their existence as they sand away in hourglasses.

Everyone nods in agreement, some — reluctantly, given the tone. The old man returns to the woman with the newspaper-parasol-fan and continues the conversation.

— Has tha heard 'bout the panels?

— What panels?

— That solar shite show panels.

— Oh, those. And what about them?

— What does tha mean, "what"? Hasn't tha heard? Everyone's talkinn.

— What are they talking?

— Terrible things they're talkinn. Just terrible.

— I'd never believe it.

— But there's no need to believe. Facts, love, facts. Does tha know why all this is happeninn?

— We're having trouble with electricity. It's always failing. We lived a week without light. Every summer this happens, even in winter. With panels, it might be better. In summer, at least. They're right there — within reach. And it's hot, so...

— Mayhaps "so", mayhaps "not so", but it's with these "panels", they'll be aiminn their devices at us.

— Ah, don't be silly, old chap. What devices, mind you?

— Has tha seen who's installinn 'em?

— No.

— There thee has it! That's the point. They rustle 'bout at night. I've seen 'em, woke up one night to noise on the street. I go out and see — the field is all lit up. At first, methinks — a fire, but neither flame nor smoke can be seen. I approach closer, and there they are, bastards — right by the panels. They're right by my house, tha knows. Did I tell thee? Terrible, in a word, bloody terrible.

A tanned boy with a freckled face and surfer hair approaches the bus stop. He is playing with a ball, or rather not a ball but a white inflated balloon with a large red digit six on it. For him, it is, however, a ball, which is, I'd say, fair enough given the circumstances. He walks around kicking it.

— Are you his teacher? — I ask the young woman.

— What? No. Why? He's just a boy, I don't know him. What made you think I teach children?

— You mentioned you're a teacher.

— That doesn't mean I teach children, does it?

It kind of does, though. In parts.

— I thought you teach children, naturally.

— You thought that; I didn't say it.

— Who do you teach, then?

— Whoever needs to be taught. Whoever needs teaching.

— Right, uh-huh... But, if you're not his teacher, why is he alone in the middle of the field, the boy?

— Why should I know?

— Well, you're a local. Everyone knows everyone here. When I was a little lad, I sure knew everyone.

— Well, tell me then where else should he be?

— At school?

— It's the summer holiday[6]. Did you forget how you went to school?

— Long ago but I did. Why is he alone, though?

— He's going home from the town. Well, he's actually not going, not in a walking sense, is he? He's waiting for the bus to Tulubaika, just like us. Deduction. Oh, you're so odd.

No one had ever told me straight to my face that I was odd but it sounded convincing as if I had always known it.

— Why would you say that?

— Pardon?

— Why am I odd?

— You ask odd questions, is all.

— Perfectly normal questions. You ask odd questions, too.

— I'm just curious. I'm fine asking odd questions.

— Well, same here.

— I like to meet new people, too. Are you a city guy?

— A city guy? I guess I am.

— Which city?

— Riyadh.

— What? Riyadh?

— Yeah, Riyadh?

— As in proper Riyadh?

— Proper Riyadh indeed.

— Oh, really?

— Yes. Do you know where it is?

— I'm not some village bumpkin, am I?

— No, sorry. Of course not.

— It's in Saudi Arabia.

— Yes.

— See? I know.

— Never doubted that.

— You thought it, I can sense it. I can sense such things.

— Of course you can.

— So far away, though, isn't it? How did you end up there? I've never been.

Of course she's never been! And I'm not being all fancy posh-mosh

about it — few people I know really have been, maybe less than to Tulubaika.

— What's it like?

— Hot.

— Is it?

— Not sure hotter than here, though.

— Very true.

And that's it — we don't talk any more, at all, never, as much as "never" can last in this climate.

Boring.

Boring, boring, boring, boring, boring-boring-borinnnn

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Time seems to stand still until you strike up a conversation.

The teacher takes a book out of her bag and starts reading. The title is somewhat peculiar. It blurs before my eyes into incomprehensibility but seems to be “Sol Invictus”, whatever that means. Is that Latin? The book is well-worn, suggesting it’s interesting. Uninteresting books just sit untouched and always look new. I should have brought a book too, any book, an uninteresting one would do, too, an airport novel. Time in the airports smells in the same manner as the smoke from smouldering sawdust — bittersweet. I do feel the same taste on my tongue, perhaps it’s dehydration, or detemporation. I could read on my phone but I prefer having a bit more battery than the great pleasure of reading, especially in a day like this. Hot. Oh, it’s fucking hot!

I see a mouse scurrying across the road, small, grey-brown, resembling an eyed and tailed pebble, or perhaps it is a pebble, a pebbling running away from heat.

— Look, a mouse, — I say calmly.

— What? Where? — the teacher responds, surprised.

She scans the ground, clutching the hem of her dress.

— Right there, — I say, pointing right at her feet.

She squeaks and jumps aside. The other people at the bus stop turn round to us. The surfer boy with the balloon stands still and looks at me creepily, as if I had stolen his chance to spot the mouse first and announce it to the world. That pebbling, however, is now nowhere to be seen.

— It seemed it was a mouse, — I say, shrugging.

Adjusting a stray lock of ginger hair, the teacher stretches a fake smile.

— You really are odd.

— That's just askinn for a stroke, — says the babushka sitting nearby. — Old I am, tha knows, scare me like this and done. Boom. Who's goinn to buy me a coffin, eh? Thee? I'd like a redwood one, please, young chap.

— Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. Just bored waiting for the bus. Trying to amuse myself, is all.

— Look at him amusinn himself, — the babushka says, grumbling. — Tha'd be better off dancing then. Dance for us, will tha?

— I'd rather not.

Her pupils dilate, her left eye starts to twitch. I mentally prepare for the

worst. Not sure what that is but there's always something worse to prepare for. Russian wisdom, that.

— Smarty-pants.

She spits on the ground, and turns away.

Oof... Silence falls for a few moments.

— What was that? — the teacher asks.

— What was what?

— Why did you upset the old lady?

— I didn't upset anyone. She was already upset when I arrived, I reckon she's chronically upset due to everything: life, weather, other things. While I've been waiting here for all those N hours she's been upset the whole time.

— You seem agitated.

— I don't seem, really. By the way, would you know when the bus is coming? What's the schedule like these days?

— No, I do not know. You scared me with that mouse, too. It affected my memory. Badly so. Now I'm oblivious. Completely so.

— Sorry, my fault. It must be that the sun has heated up my head.

She frowns.

— You are odd. Actually are.

— Fine, I am odd. My phone's almost dead. I'm afraid to even check the time.

— It's half-past one, — the teacher says, glancing at the gold sundial on her right wrist. — There's also the word "please" in our language, by the way. Or have you forgotten it all in your Riyadhs?

— Thank you. I mean, please. No, I actually meant both now.

None of us can believe I'm forming sentences like that when talking to people.

— Do you wear your... "watch" on your right wrist? — I ask her.

— I do.

— Why on the right?

— I like it like that.

— Are you left-handed?

— I am.

— I see. The bus ought to have been here half an hour ago.

— The bus doesn't owe anyone anything. It's simply a bus.

— I wish I could be simply a bus and owe nothing to anyone.

Convenient life, that is.

— You could be if you really wanted to.

— That would be odd, though.

— It can hardly be any odder, can it?

The teacher looks at me languidly and then returns her gaze to her reading. I notice a page has fallen out of her book and lean down to pick it up, managing to read a few lines along the way, or not managing — the lines immediately slip from my memory. Something about Sol. I hand the page to the teacher. Trying to be nice, I am.

— That's not mine, — she says.

— How is it not yours? Whose then?

The teacher shrugs. Weird. I must be hallucinating. This heat.

— I saw it falling out of your book. This one.

— This heat. People see things. I do see things. Do you?

— I, er... Has anybody lost this? — I ask those around, lifting the page high.

Silence ensues. I'm utterly convinced it fell from the teacher's book. I swear I saw it slipping.

— Absolutely sure not yours?

— Absolutely, — she says, keeping her face down, reading, not showing any signs of emotions. Perhaps I've upset her. — What's in it?

— I don't know. Haven't read it, something about Sol. The sun?

— I see. Why don't you read it for us?

— I'm not good at reading aloud.

— Give it a try.

— Why should I try?

— Everyone's bored. We're all friends here. No one will judge. It's a safe space.

— Is it, though?

— You never know unless you try.

Of course. Why would I do that, though? What for? Am I becoming submissive? First — dancing, now — reading?

— All right.

Well, here we go, I say to myself. Refused the old lady's wish, complied with the young one's desire. Clearly, ageism.

I silently read the first line: "O Sol, bright Sol, on thy heavenly chariot." An auspicious beginning, it rather is.

— Seems like some sort of poem, or maybe a song.

— A poem? Is it? About what?

— Sol, as I said.

— Could you read it out, please?

I skim to a random line: “With thy beams, burn the impure and wicked, cleansing our sacred soil!”

— I would rather not read it out loud.

— Why not? Stubborn like a child.

— Perhaps you’d like to read? You are a teacher, after all. You should have a better voice.

— You found the paper — you read.

— I would rather not.

— I see. Men, making a tragedy out of such nonsense.

— Do you know that tragedy means “goat-song” in Greek?

— You really are odd.

Odd again. Always odd. I take a deep breath, the hot air scorching my nostrils and lungs. My neck’s in a vice. That’s the physical sensation. A cold sweat runs down from it to my back, instantly warming. It feels like

being called to the board to recite a poem I haven't learned.

— Fine, if you insist. But I warn you, I'm not a good speaker. It'll be a torture.

— It's okay, what haven't we seen or heard around these parts? Plus, anything's better than just standing here in silence, isn't it? Some amusement for the bored.

I read with as much expression as I can muster:

— *O Sol, bright Sol, on thy heavenly chariot*

Arising daily over the earth!

Thou art the all-seeing eye, the life-giving luminary

That drivest away the creeping darkness.

O righteous Sol, whose visage lights up the fields and valleys!

— Could you possibly read a little louder?

I feel the words penetrating me. I feel them inside my veins. I don't want it, but I'm becoming words, at least my body, at least it tries, it tries to sound louder but my throat has dried out and, tasting even more bittersweet, is beginning to itch.

— *With thy beams, burn the impure and wicked, cleansing our sacred soil!*

To thee we raise our praise and thanksgiving

And offer sacrifices without end.

— Could you add a bit more volume? I'm afraid they can't hear you in the back.

And I do, I submit to the words.

LET US EXALT SOL INVICTUS THAT BREAKS THROUGH THE MORNING MIST!

BEFORE THY GOLDEN RAYS THE STARS DIM AND FADE.

WASH US, CLEANSE WITH THY RIGHTEOUS FIRE OUR SINFUL FILTH!

MAY THE MONGREL PERISH IN THE DARKNESS ETERNAL! MAY THE WEAK BE CONSUMED!

Upon finally hearing what I have been reading, the old man flies into a rage. His face wrinkled up, flushed with anger, he hobbles over to me.

— Thee bastard! One of those, eh?!

— What "those"?

— Those very ones! A fork-tongued eunuch!

I see the old man clench his fists and I begin to back away as he keeps stomping towards me, picking up pace, kicking up dust as if smoke

trailed behind him.

— Thee sun-scourged maggot!

He reaches me and grabs me by the collar. Turns out, the old man is strong and has a formidable grip, much grippier than mine.

— Hey! Easy there!

— Give it to me, thee slag!

Releasing one hand, he tries to snatch the page from me with the other. I dodge. I dodge well. Never knew I could dodge so well.

— Hey, it's not even mine! — I exclaim, trying to gently push him away.

— Not thy?! Whose then?!

— I don't know! I found it.

— And tha'll say it was brought by the wind next! — he spits. — Bastard!

— Quite possibly. I, the fool, picked it up. Never seen anything like it before. Never will, hopefully. I wasn't myself, maybe. I don't know. Really, it's all the heat, the sun.

The old man calms down a little, probably to catch his breath.

— Not local, is tha?

— Local through and through, heading to my parents'.

— Do I know thy parents?

— You might know my grandpa, sir. It's the white house at the very edge of the village. It's a one-house street.

Sir? That's an anti-sir in front of me. His frown deepened, and, unsure whether to believe me, he loosened his grip.

— Give me that bloody shite then.

Having no reason to keep the page, I hand it over to the old man. He skims through it, scowls, and spits on the ground again.

— What filth. No shame, no conscience. The invincible sun, my arse. Fuckin 'ell.

— Not in front of the children, mister, — says the teacher. She's irritated and tense.

— He knows words worse than that. Right, laddie?

The boy silently nods. There's a hint of a sly smile on his face. Little bastard.

— Cunt! — yells the boy.

Everyone twitches. The old man laughs heartily.

— Told you lot! Now, own up, whose paper is this, then? — says he.

Silence falls. The teacher says nothing. She stands there, staring at the ground, arms crossed, hiding the title of her book. But I know it's "Sol Invictus". It was her doing, definitely hers. A femme fatale, a mysterious, mischievous, manipulative, possibly dangerous woman, she is.

— Oi? — the old man presses again.

— Probably dropped by the motorcyclist, — the teacher murmurs. — There he is, by the way, coming back again. You can ask him.

True enough. The familiar engine sound intensifies. Over the field, a vast cloud of dust and atrocious gas soars higher and rushes uswards. The hairs inside my nose curl up, anticipating the pungent invasion. I'm preparing to sneeze. Against the backdrop of the sweltering air, the same motorcyclist with the pink mohawk appears on the road. Shielding our faces with our hands, we step back to the verge, almost into the oats. The white balloon slips from the boy's grasp; he tries to reach for it and steps on the road, but the woman with the newspaper pulls him back away from danger.

— PUNKS NOT DEAD! — the motorcyclist shouts, roaring past and running over the boy's balloon, either by accident or deliberately, as if it were a dead or artificial fly on a urinal.

The balloon pops. Its rubber fragments lie scattered on the road. No signs of "six" seen. We all stand together, watching as the motorcyclist disappears into the depths of the field.

— It was definitely him, — I say. — Pure evil, this guy.

The boy silently walks over to where the balloon mayhem occurred, picks up the rubber remains from the ground.

— Cunt! — he yells, and begins to sob, quietly.

— There, there, love, come here, — the woman with the newspaper says, trying to hug him, but he shrugs off her hand and steps aside.

— These sun-arse bastards, damn 'em all, — grumbles the old man and walks away from us.

— Degenerates! — adds the babushka. — Shall they perish in hell! Shall their souls forever boil in oil! Shall their balls dry out!

— Aye, nowt else to add. Tha speaks truth, — says the old man, his face revealing he's clearly surprised by the babushka's eloquence.

The glossolalic ordeal is over but I don't feel any better: tired, thirsty, sweat running down my back, all my clothes soaked through. Still no sign of the bus. I hope it will have AC. But who am I kidding. At my parents' house, it was always warm in winter and cool in summer without any air conditioning. I know what I'll do when I'm in Tulubaika. I'll take a shower in the garden and dive into my old bedroom like I did as a child. There was no sun there — it faced north. It was like a cave. On one of the walls, there was wallpaper of a golden birch forest stretching into infinity with a gigantic raven flying above it. I used to love lying on the bed, being in that forest, imagining walking

under the birches, losing my way to Tulubaika, finding it back. I hope my parents haven't changed it. When I arrive, I'll switch on my old PC if it still starts up, sift through my old CDs, pull out old games. What plot, what gameplay they had! They don't make them like that any more. I hope my eyes don't bleed from the graphics, though.

— Thank you, — whispers the teacher, sneaking up from behind into my reverie.

Here she is again.

— What do you want?

— I said thank you.

— For what?

— For not giving me away, — she whispers.

I nod stoically. "Giving her away." I see.

— Was there anything to worry about?

— What do you think?

— I don't answer questions asked in response to questions.

Rude? Or not so much? She falls silent. So, it was rude, yes. Awkward. How odd I am. I should learn to communicate with people.

— What are you thinking about? — she asks.

At least she's not offended.

— The same thing as everyone, about the bus.

— I'm not thinking about the bus.

— If not the bus, what are you thinking about then? Is there anything at all in this world to think about rather than the bus? Bonkers.

— About Tulubaika, of course. Imagine, in a few hours you'll arrive in the village... what will you do then?

Few hours? Sounds optimistic. Few centuries, more like.

— I'll be lying down.

— Is that all? You travelled all this way, from Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, just to lie down?

— Listen, I just want to lie down. I'm tired. I'll lie down all week, eat my mum's cooking, maybe play old games with my niece, watch the stupid telly, and debate conspiracy theories with my grandfather. Today, I've learned some new ones — we have plenty to discuss. And I'll tell them about the deserts. Have you ever seen real dunes?

— Deserts and dunes aside, Tulubaika has so much to offer. Fancy fishing? Then head to the lake or river. Fancy a swim? You have it right there. Do you know how magically the water glistens in Sollie's light? The whole area is blooming now, the scents are countless, organic

perfumery all the way along. Do you know how delicious the air there is? Not like in your cities, in Riyadh. It must be all fumes there! In Tulubaika, even just breathing is always a pleasure. Just existing. Step into a field or forest, take a deep breath, and you feel better, you're healed, cured of all your pain. Cleansed. You listen, and the wind whispers softly, crickets chirp, birds sing. Spread your arms wide, close your eyes, face Sollie, and your soul rejoices.

— You have plenty of moles, on your arms, legs, and face, by the way. You shouldn't expose them to your "Sollie" too often. You might get cancer.

— I use cream.

— "Sun"-screen?

— Don't call it that.

— Why not?

— Sollie is a source of light, warmth, life, not a threat.

— Then why the cream?

— Sollie cares for us and sends as much light and warmth as we need. And if a person lives in harmony with it, no harm will come to them.

— Then why the cream?

— Sollie only cleanses the impure, others are safe to accept His light.

— But why the cream?

She looks at me with the most enigmatic gaze I've ever seen (she's topped it again), looks, and remains blissfully tranquil. Seconds pass, minutes, hours, centuries, stars flop and black holes become twice as dark.

— It makes my skin soft, — she finally answers.

— Ah, I see.

— Here, feel it.

The teacher grabs my hand and places my palm on her forearm. The skin is soft, warm, damp, and slippery from the sunscreen mixed with sweat.

— Well?

I withdraw my hand, look at my palm, then back at her.

— Well what?

— What do you think? About my skin.

— Not bad.

— Hm. I see.

She ponders, then, without warning again, grabs my hand and places it on her thigh. The skin is as slippery and sweaty but gentler, firmer, more

elastic. She probably does many thousand steps a day.

— What about now?

— Not bad. Better.

— Better? Is that all?

— Yes. Skin is skin. Very hot, though. And it's already hot enough. Now my hand is slippery.

— Odd you are. How's your sex life?

So I am the odd one.

— It's, well, a private matter.

— Do you have a girlfriend?

— I have a wife.

— I see. I wouldn't tell. Do you have many friends?

— Of course, I do. I mean, I have some.

— In Tulubaika?

— Not in Tulubaika, why would I need friends in Tulubaika? I don't live there.

— That's a pity.

— Why?

— I pity you.

— What?

— I think you're missing out on something important.

— Am I? Like what?

— Will you come to ours?

— Ours what? Where?

— To the club.

Club? What club? What is she talking about? Is it a youth club? A tennis club? Is it a drama club? Or a cult?

— What club?

— Interests club.

— What interests?

— Special interests, you'll like it. The Summer Solstice is coming, it'll be fun. Trust me.

I look at her: all in white, her face sweet, friendly, smiling. I think, ponder, evaluate the situation. If someone asks to trust them, it can mean only one thing.

— No, thank you, I won't come.

— Why not?

— Have you seen Ari Aster's "Midsommar"[7]?

— No.

— Well, that's why.

So we stand, confused, awkward, waiting. The babushka sits, silent, possibly dead. The woman with the newspaper has spread it over her head. She's not happy being here and likely feels sick, I can tell from her face. A huge, nasty horse-fly is bugging the unballooned surfer boy. It's as big as a hornet. The boy tries to shake it off for a while, then, after a series of futile attempts, grabs it in his fist. The horse-fly buzzes, trying to escape, but the boy doesn't let go, nor does he squeeze it; instead, he takes a straw, inserts it into the insect's arse, and now lets it go. The horse-fly, bewildered, flies off with the straw in its rear. Meanwhile, the old man starts mumbling again.

— I awoke one night, me back seized in such agony I thought it would be the end of me. Yet, I recovered somewhat, ventured out into the garden to see if the hares hadn't made off with the carrots again, fluffy bastards. All seemed calm, serene even. And there I stood, enjoyinn a cigar sent by me son from Cuba, mind thee, rolled on a thigh of a busty Cuban lass. I only smoke 'em at night, in secrecy, for fear of the envious gaze and ill wishes of today's folk. And one night I heard a humminn,

subtle but annoyinn, like a ringing in the ear. It seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere. Feeling otherwise fine, I deduced it must be something external. As I savoured me excellent cigar, I spotted something strange aloft. It was massive and indistinct, clearly not an aircraft for they don't glide so slowly, nor a bird, for it was far too large and had no wings. I fetched a torch, futilely shininn it upwards, only to see a vague oval silhouette. I then took out me phone — another gift from my lad (a camera is great by the by) — and snapped a few pictures, Dziga Vertov, me arse. Sadly, the screen showed nowt but darkness. I went back inside for me huntinn rifle, reckoninn I'd take a shot at the craft, aye, I would. After all, what else could it be but one of their "devices"? But as I emerged, weapon in hand, the craft had vanished.

Silence.

— And that's it? — asks the woman from behind her newspaper.

— Just like that, it disappeared.

— Fascinating.

— Probably a UFO, — I suggest.

— A what? May thy tongue blister, thee bastard, — the old man retorts. — It might well be a UFO, but I reckon it was that thing, their device, the one that slices through the ozone layer to boil us all alive 'ere.

— One typically boils in water, though, — I note.

— Tha, sun-blasted fool, would be boiled dry.

— Just theorising. I'm on your side, by the way. I program clouds.

— What?

— Clouds. I program them to bring rain.

— And where might thy clouds be, "programmer"?

— Well, in Saudi Arabia.

— In the desert, tha means?

— Something like that.

— And who the blazes needs clouds there? To water the sand? The world's mad!

The conversation, it seemed, had reached an aporia, much like our bus somewhere. I lean towards the babushka to check if she was still breathing. Her eyes are closed. I peer into her face, listen for her breath, and she suddenly opens her eyes.

— Boo!

I jerk back, retreating towards the teacher with her book. She laughs.

— Aren't you something! Trying to kiss the babushka.

— I wanted to help. I thought she was, you know, dead.

— Would that make it a good idea to kiss her? Sleeping beauty.

— I wasn't going to kiss her. I was checking if she's breathing.

— Oh, indeed, she'll outlive us all. You're the one restless and sweating, while she sits calmly, waiting. You could learn a thing or two about patience from the older generation.

— I don't like waiting. Especially not in this heat.

— Suppose it's not hot in Saudi Arabia?

— Of course it's hot. Fifty degrees now.

— There you go.

— It feels different there. At least they have air conditioning.

— Listen to the bourgeois, "air conditioning".

— The air here's humid. I'm suffocating. Feels like I'm gonna have a heatstroke. Damned sun.

— Hold your tongue. Speak ill of Sollie, and Sollie will surely strike you down.

Suddenly, growing louder in the distance, a hum encroaches upon our cosy timeless space. Hope exists, I reckon, but then immediately I understand — not really. The hum turns into a familiar roar, a cloud of dust and exhaust fumes crawling from its source. Everyone braces

themselves, covering their faces, turning away. Then he appears, the motorcyclist, hurtling towards us with his pink mohawk shining. To spike a mohawk properly, I recall, one should use beer, otherwise — not trü[8].

Anticipating his approach, the babushka picks up a stone and, as the motorcyclist nears, hurls it at him. Instantly, without a whistle or sound, the stone strikes his head with an accurate shot. The motorcyclist loses control before he could even cry out. The front wheel twists sharply, throwing him onto the road as his motorcycle crashes, tumbles, and flies off into the field, flattening a few metres of oats.

Silence.

To say the least, we are all in a profound, petrifying, trembling shock.

Fucked up it is. Forgive me, I simply have no other words.

We stand, speechless, our mouths agape, staring at the contorted motorcyclist lying on the road.

— Take that, degenerate! — yells the babushka at the motorcyclist, continuing to sit in her place.

We, except the killer, collectively approach the disfigured, bloodied body of the motorcyclist. Legs twisted, trousers halfway down, an arm broken with a white-and-red bone protruding from his forearm. His bare, tattooed torso covered in cuts and scratches. His face, having apparently slid a few metres across gravel, is all torn up, bloody, and

dirty, with no nose in sight (and his mohawk is crumpled).

No one says anything. They are either too stunned or overflowing with intrigue. There's actually a minute of silence:

I lean over to the motorcyclist, my ear pricked up.

— Not breathing, it seems, — I say.

The teacher presses a finger to his neck.

— No pulse either. Bad luck.

— Well, this is a fine mess, — says the woman with the newspaper. — What an actual situation. Oh.

— There was a lad, and now there's a lad no more, — adds an old man. — Just like that. **Poof** — and it's all over. Eh... Life...

— Don't even say it, old chap, — says the woman, grabbing her neck as if intending to strangle herself while her other hand starts frantically waving a newspaper.

— Serves him right! — the babushka shouts. — Degenerate ponk!

We look at her, speechless. I, for my part, have yet to fully grasp what has happened and that there's a real dead person lying in front of me. I've only seen such things in films and games before. In games, I could smash anyone's head with a stone. I could do that easily, about a hundred or thousand times per evening. It is, actually, a lot of fun. Do I feel anything about that now? Probably not. He's just lying there. Well, shit happens, they say. "Bad luck." I hope he doesn't come back to life and eat us. But what if he does? On one hand, it would be an intriguing twist of events, on the other — a bit eerie perspective. Narratively, it would be odd and lazy as well because I've already told you it might happen. So, no, it won't.

— Perhaps we should call an ambulance, — I suggest.

— An ambulance? — says the old man.

— An ambulance, — the woman repeats after me.

— An ambulance, — says I.

— Look at him, what good would an ambulance do? — says the teacher.

Indeed. Looking at him — an ambulance is hardly going to be of any help, even if it arrives sooner than the bus.

— Right on, love. Need an undertaker, we do. I know a guy.

— And the police, — the babushka suddenly adds. — Give that bastard a fine! For speedinn.

— A fine?

— I don't feel it's fine at all, to be honest.

— Tha, thee old witch, should be locked up, spend your life behind bars, — the old man retorts. — Fuckinn 'ell.

— They drive like that! Degenerates!

— You should hold your tongue, madam. You're only making things worse for yourself, — says the woman. — There are witnesses here.

— Can't breathe here. The place is overrun with degenerates! Stuffed with degeneracy! — says the babushka.

— I'm calling the police, — I say. — And an ambulance. And all the

rest.

— Go ahead, — says the old man. — The bus will come soon, we'll hop on and be off, and tha can sit here with the crazy old witch waiting for the coppers and the coroner.

— We'll wait. This is a crime scene, after all. The babushka killed the motorcyclist, — says the woman.

— By cruel means, — I add. — With a stone.

I feel a pebble hit me in the back of the head. Painful. There'll be a bruise. I turn around — the babushka is picking up another pebble and, grunting, is getting ready to stand up.

— Hey, what are you doing!

— Off shall tha fuck, ponk! — the babushka says and throws another stone at me.

— Hey! I'm calling the police.

— Ring thy bellend![9]

Another pebble. The babushka adjusts her skirt and, continuing to hurl pebbles, walks back down the road in the opposite direction from Tulubaika.

— Where do you think you're going?!

— Mind thine own fuckinn business!

I pull out my phone. It's off. In my blurry memory there's no record of me turning it off. I turn it on. Wait. Wait. Wait, a long time, seconds, minutes, hours, centuries. It turns on. One per cent battery. There's even a signal. I dial 02[10]. The phone turns off and starts to heat up. Confused, I don't know what to do.

— Hey! Babushka, stop where you are!

Hands shaking, I start speaking into the turned-off phone.

— Police? There's been an incident here. Yes, on the road to Tulubaika, a babushka has killed a motorcyclist. Will you be coming soon? Brilliant. Hear that, babushka? They are coming for you! — I shout after the departing murderer, but she either doesn't hear or simply ignores me.

It appears the teacher has noticed my phone turned off, and, having heard my conversation with the imaginary police, she rolls her eyes and shakes her head.

The phone in my hand grows warmer, warmer, and warmer until it's as hot as an iron. A spasm involuntarily courses through my hand, and without my consent, it (hand) flings the phone onto the road. I approach the device, look — the screen, it seems, is done.

— What about the police? What did they say? Are they coming? — the teacher asks.

What a bitch.

— They said they'll be here shortly.

— Is that what they said? Shortly?

— Yes, that's what they said, — I say rudely, swallowing what little saliva I've gathered, possibly the very last water in my organism. — We are told to wait. They promised they'll be here soon.

— Promised? Soon? They never say such things.

— Well, this time they did. They were very polite and considerate. As police should be.

— Remind me, for how long have you been away?

— Infinitely long, and that time, in fact, keeps increasing.

— The longer we wait, the more it increases.

— This is what I've said.

— Should we just wait?

— This is what we've been doing. No reason to stop waiting.

— But the babushka?

— She's left.

— I can see that but don't you want to detain her?

— I do not. Do you?

— She won't get far, that old nag, — the old man inserts. — The coppers will nab her right there on the road.

Meanwhile, the old nag, limping, vanishes around the bend in the road.

— Would you like to call an ambulance as well? — the teacher asks.

What a bitch x2.

— I might.

— Ambulance... — the woman with the newspaper says softly.

Only then do we see she's out of sorts, staggering, her eyes rolling back, legs buckling; she drops the newspaper and collapses onto the road. We approach her, check if she's breathing — she is, thankfully, but unconscious. Her forehead is burning like a stove. You could cook eggs on it.

— I can't, my phone's dead. Does anyone else have a phone?

— I've seen enough of thy damned little phones, — the old man declares. — Ever wonder how *they* find us? Thy phones have navigation chips in them. Be it towers, panels, or some other nonsense like 3G, 5G — damn them all. Look at the youth today: riddled with cancer from head to toe, PTSD, autism, degeneracy, punk — all because of them

phones. Radiation, that's what it is. Sun only makes it worse.

I glance at the teacher, expecting her to help with the next dialogue line, but she merely shrugs in response.

— I try to keep my mind pure, — she says. — No phone.

Noted-understood.

— And you, boy? Do you have a phone?

Where would he go without a phone, I wonder. What if he gets lost? Though, when I was his age, we ran around just the same. Parents off to work, you're off to the bus stop, jump on a bus, head into town with friends. Like cats, come and go as you please, and no one asks any questions. The boy just silently shakes his head. No! He doesn't have a phone! All this time he's just been standing on the side or whatever and he doesn't even have a phone!

— Let's move her into the shade. Grab her legs, — I tell the teacher.

— Where do you see the shade?

I lift the woman by her arms. Her body is heavy, sweaty, slipping from my grasp. Or I am weak. We drag her to the side of the road, closer to the oats. That's where we lay her down. Of course, I realise, there are no signs of any shade. Even oats don't cast shadows. The newspaper, right. I take it, unfold it into a makeshift paper tent over the woman's head to create some shade at least. I notice the front page: in bold letters, it

reads:

ANOMALOUS HEATWAVE. WHAT NEXT?

The teacher takes out a small flask from her bag, pours some on her palms, and starts rubbing it on the woman's face, then splashes some onto her lips.

— What's that?

Smells of alcohol.

— Sun water. For protection.

Uh-huh, "sun water."

— May I have some? For protection.

— You don't need it. You don't need protection.

— Why don't I need protection?

— I can see it in you. You're already protected.

— No, I'm not. I've never felt less protected than now.

— Neither have I.

She looks me straight in the eye, brings the flask to her lips, and takes a swig. A lump slowly travels down her slender neck. She doesn't even flinch. And from the smell of it, there was enough reason to flinch.

— What now? — she asks.

— I don't know.

— What, not a single idea, programmer?

A thought occurs. A perfectly fine thought, but questionable. I discard it.

We hear the muffled sounds of kicks. Turning around, we see the surfer boy standing and kicking the deceased motorcyclist. Meanwhile, the old man stands by, laughing as he observes the scene.

— Hey! — I shout at him.

The boy doesn't react and continues his kicking.

— What are you doing? That's a person there.

— It's a corpse, isn't it?

— Was a person. He was a person.

— Was, but gone now, isn't he? Like completely?

To put it mildly, I'm shocked.

— And tell me, why are you kicking him?

— Because he popped my balloon. It was my birthday balloon. I liked it. My girlfriend bought it for me.

— Well, happy birthday then.

— Not so happy any more, is it?

— Still, kicking a dead man isn't right. Do you think you're doing a good thing? What do your parents teach you?

— Popping children's balloons isn't right either, is it? They taught me I should do that. Popping others' balloons.

— Kicking a dead man is worse than popping a balloon.

— Is that so?

— Way worse.

The boy stops and looks at me, his eyes empty, his face devoid of emotion.

— But have you ever seen a corpse before, mister?

— What? No.

— Neither have I, — he shrugs.

— Why kick it, though? Why would you kick a corpse? A man's corpse?

— The corpse doesn't care, does he? But it amuses me.

Amuses him.

— Oh, it amuses you?

— Yes. It is fun, isn't it?

— What's fun about it?!

— No one's fighting back.

Indeed.

— And it's my birthday.

— Look, boy, I can't do this any more. We need your help. That lady over there is unwell.

The surfer boy looks at the woman whose head is covered by a newspaper.

— What's wrong with her?

— Heatstroke.

— She was very upset by what she saw, — interjects the teacher. — We're all upset.

— So do you want me to start kicking her too?

The grandfather laughs heartily, wiping the sweat from his brow.

— Look at the youth these days, — he says. — And they say: wasted generation. Not even a sign of it — all-round good bloke.

— There's no need to kick anyone. Stop it, please.

I kneel and take the boy by his shoulders.

— Where did you come from?

— From the town. You're hurting me.

— No, I'm not. Can you go back to the town and ask them to send the police and an ambulance here?

— And the bus, — adds the teacher.

— And the bus. Of course, and the bus.

The boy's hesitant. A lot. Glancing, he examines our levels of tilt.

— What's in it for me?

— I... I'll buy you an ice cream, okay? The chocolate one. With hazelnuts. Do you like it?

— I don't want ice cream.

— What? What do you want then?

— Mister, I want to kick corpses. And a balloon. I want my balloon back.

— All right, I'll buy you a balloon.

— With the same number? It's my birthday.

— Yes, happy birthday, of course. Same number, same colour — all you want, really.

He shakes his head.

— I don't think you understand what I want. You better give me some money. I can buy it myself.

Cunning. I look at him — standing there, pouting his lips, furrowing his brows, his gaze avoiding mine.

— All right. Good, I'll give you money. Fine.

I take out a banknote from my wallet and hand it to the boy.

— What is this?

— It's money. A banknote.

— Crikey.

— What?

— It won't be enough for a balloon.

— Are you sure? It's plenty of money for ten balloons.

— Balloons are very expensive these days, mister. I had to save from my meals for a week to get just that one. For my birthday.

I count out a few more notes.

— Right, fine, of course. Here's for the balloon... Happy birthday again.

I hand him another note.

— And for the ice cream.

Another note.

— Is that enough for everything you want right now? Except kicking. It's not for sale, I'm afraid.

The boy nods, turns around, and runs off towards the city.

— Call an ambulance and the police! — I shout after him. — And the bus.

— Cunts! — yells the boy as he disappears around the bend.

Meanwhile, the teacher takes another generous sip of her "sun water."

— Look at the youth these days, — the old man repeats, shaking his head and, scratching the back of his head and fixing the NY cap, starts walking around the motorcyclist's body until he notices something on the buttock beneath the lowered trousers — a tattoo of the sun with eight rays.

— One of 'em! Bloody bastard! — the old man exclaims and starts

kicking the corpse too.

— Hey, stop that!

No reaction follows.

— I'll kill you all, maggots! — he shouts, unclear whether at the motorcyclist or at us. — I'll show you. You sun-worshippinn fanatics.

— Oi! — I shout at the grandfather, but he continues kicking.

In panic mode, I turn to the teacher.

— Say something to him.

— What should I say?

— To stop? That would be nice.

— He's ferocious. Why wouldn't you tell him?

— He doesn't like me.

— All these bastards. You won't burn me. Reading their books, walkinn around shouting "the invincible sun, the invincible sun." Disgusting! Damn you all.

The teacher shrugs, finishes her sun water, and, coming closer, whispers to me:

— By the way, I have a tattoo, too. Someplace. Fancy taking a peek?

I recoil from her, stumbling back, nearly falling, and move away. The heat's driven everyone mad. I want to go home. I want to go home. I want to go home. My brain's turned to mash, seems to have fused into one big heavy lump, swelling and pressing from the inside against my skull, harder around the temples and the back of my head. Where's the bus? What's the bus? Why's the bus? My head spins along with the surrounding oat field. Where is it? Where am I? I feel nauseous. I grab my hair and scream:

— Bus! Hey! We're here! Bus! Bus! Bus! I'm here!

The teacher and the old man startle.

— What are you yelling for? — asks the old man.

— Don't you worry, — says the teacher. — Calm down.

— Bus! Bus! Hey! Someone help!

— It'll come, don't be upset. The bus is always late. It's normal for the bus to be late. We'll all be in Tulubaika sooner or later.

— Don't be upset? Don't be upset?! Do you see what's going on?!

I settle onto the ground, enveloping myself with my arms. I don't feel like screaming, nor crying any more; in fact, I feel like nothing whatsoever, except perhaps for a yearning to sink deep into the ground, so deep that the cold seeps in, and warmth becomes a forgotten sensation. Yes, I crave the coolness, the chill, the clarity of thought, the

lightness of the mind, my childhood bedroom, my cave. But instead, I feel as though I'm being boiled alive, like a lobster. Or worse, boiled dry. I fall to the side, curl up into a ball, press my cheek against the ground, and just lie there. I don't want to listen to anyone. I don't want to see anyone. I don't want anything. The surface, despite being as hot as everything else around, is slightly cooler than the air and smells of dust, straw, and manure. Suddenly, I feel a wet, cold hand on my shoulder; I shudder and shrug it off.

— Leave me alone! I don't want to see any of you any more.

— Just look up at the sky, — I hear the teacher saying.

— I don't fucking want to look at your fucking sun or Sollie or whatever the fuck it's called.

— Oh, please. Language. But it's not Sollie.

— Then what? Fucking moon, huh?

— No, don't be silly, look. It's an airship.

Air-what?

— An aerostat, — she says.

— What?

Curious, I open my eyes and look at her.

— Don't look at me, look up. There, — she says, pointing in another direction at the sky.

I turn, propping myself up on my hands, and gaze at the sky afar. There, resembling a huge white cloud, an airship, an enormous dirigible balloon with a red digit six glides almost uswards. Its engine, possibly electric, emits a droning, sonorous trill, a single sustained note, resonating through the field — a choir of cicadas trapped inside a subwoofer. Trailing behind it is a cone-shaped tail of spray, covering an area of tens, perhaps hundreds of metres. The airship is bringing us rain. Oh, yes! Water! Sweet water! Come here, my dear!

— Hey! We're here! Hey!

— Over here! — the teacher joins me.

The old man notices the airship, too, and turns pale.

— No... No... They've found me... Bastards!

He takes off his NY cap and, bending and groaning, with his trembling fingers, fumbles in his pockets. After searching himself all over, he pulls a crumpled piece of foil from his trousers' back pocket, straightens it out, and wraps it around his bald head.

— Damn it! They've found me. Me! I told you lot!

We, not at all surprised, continue to shout and whistle, in response to which the old man, with a look of both universal, existential dread, and

deep, childlike terror, crouches, and scurries over to us. His eyes blaze, the cap gleams.

— Shhh! No! Stop that! You idiots! Idiots!

We ignore him and keep trying to attract the airship's attention, jumping and shouting.

— Enough, damn you all. Enough! Shhh!

Then the airship shifts direction slightly and now heads straight at us, dragging its watery cloud behind. The old man sees this, crouches even lower.

— Tch! Tch! The lot of you! Bastards! Fucking 'ell!

And so, ducking, nervously looking around, holding on to his shiny helmet, he darts from the open road into the dense oat fields and vanishes.

We watch him leave and continue to shout and jump. There's a warmth in our hearts, not in a thermal sense, but in an uplifting, hopeful sense, as if we, shipwrecked, have been stranded on a deserted island, and after years of waiting, a ship finally appears on the horizon. Not a bus, though, but good enough. Time freezes again, hangs in the air and stretches into an endlessly long strip like a taut string ready to snap at the slightest touch.

And then, we're engulfed in the airship's shadow. The sun hides behind

a massive cloud looming over us for an inestimable interval, while our bodies shake in anticipation. The teacher places her hand on my shoulder, and I don't mind; I, too, place my hand on her shoulder, and she doesn't mind. I stretch out the other hand, close my eyes, squeeze them as tight as I can, so tight that abstract shapes morph into oval blobs, the airship's imprint. And then, right away, we're drenched by a fine, cool rain, like the kind you get on a cold autumn morning, which feels annoying, as if someone's spraying your face with an atomiser, but right now, it's all we want. Drench me, dirigible! Soak me through! And it does, with a dense tropical downpour, washing the dust off my face, rinsing the greasy clumped hair, washing away the sweat from my body, soaking my clothes with crisply cool water. Transcendent goosebumps run all over my skin, from my nape, down my back, along my arms, down my legs, even to my little toes. They are happy, too. The teacher and I fall to our knees on the ground, arms outstretched, laughing, sticking out our tongues as far as possible to catch as much water as we can.

The rain stops, and with it goes away the shadow. Outside, there's coolness, the smell of wet earth, inside — bliss, a light shiver. We rise, soaked, and watch as the airship slowly drifts away.

Everything around us is now dewy and sodden. Puddles have formed. The dirigible-borne rain has flattened the oats a little, washed the blood off the motorcyclist, mixing it with the mud. The woman on the roadside still lies there. The thoroughly soaked newspaper clings to her face. Probably dead.

Silence.

The sun rays are felt anew on my skin, comforting. We look at each other, clothes clinging to our bodies, water trickling down. The teacher smiles.

— Well, — she says, — now that no one hears us, would you like to talk more about the Invincible Sun?

My smile turns wry and nervy, and I pull my hand away.

Notes

1. “Kirdyk” (кирдык) is a word of Tatar origin that entered Russian slang, meaning “the end,” “finished,” or “doom”, pronounced with a fatalistic emphasis on the second syllable. It functions as both noun and verb to indicate a situation has reached its terminal state, similar to “game over” or “kaput”.
2. The rendering of “Солнышко” as “Sollie” and “Боженька” as “Goddie” is a linguistic compromise in the face of Russian’s formidable diminutive arsenal. In English you can append “-y,” “-ie,” or the ghastly “-kins” to convey affection, but Russian’s morphological playground of suffixes is wider and can express everything from tender endearment to cosmic reverence, or both at the same time. Were the translator to render it as simply “Sun” and “God”, a nuance would almost certainly be lost on Anglophone readers, who, bless their hearts, must now contend with coinages reminiscent of children’s television presenters. Such are the hardships of cross-cultural semantic transfer — what Jakobson might have termed “diminutive desperation.”
3. In early Soviet times, “Kulaks” (кулаки, lit. “fists”) were peasant farmers branded as class enemies for the crime of modest agricultural success, essentially sentenced for possessing a cow too many. “Liquidation” (ликвидация) was a common bureaucratic euphemism for any systematic elimination. Russian historical memory possesses a certain recursive quality, so programmers,

earning significantly more than an average person and thus sometimes having inflated egos, are often mocked for that (without bloodshed so far).

4. This is a reference to implicit containerisation orchestration via "docker compose up," the imperative command utilised to instantiate ephemeral virtualised microservice instances in a multi-tenant Kubernetes-adjacent deployment pipeline familiar to all "programmers" who engage in contemporary DevOps practices with containerized CI/CD workflows. The translator trusts this explanation will prove illuminating to those readers who, unlike "programmers", may not immediately grasp the elegant parallelism between the futility of attempting to configure persistent storage in ephemeral containers and the narrator's equally futile desire to summon meteorological relief from the heat.
5. "Drandulet" (драндулет) is a derogatory Russian term for an old, decrepit vehicle or jalopy. The word carries connotations of both the vehicle's poor condition and the questionable judgment of its owner.
6. It's the longest school holiday in Russia for all grades, includes all three summer months almost in their entirety.
7. Look it up, with the spoilers.
8. Russian spelling of English-borrowed "true" is "труъ". Although that last letter isn't necessary, the hard sign (ъ) in "труъ" is a distinctive feature of (already dated) Russian internet slang where adding this letter gives words like "true" an exaggerated intensity and authenticity. The hard sign at the end used to be a part of Russian orthography in pre-revolurionary times when it was also kinda of unnecessary. The internet usage originated in metal music subcultures, especially among black metal enthusiasts ("True Norwegian Black Metal") to distinguish between "trü" black metal and "posers". The ъ-suffix evolved to signify something as absolutely authentic, "old", canonical, or hardcore. Thus the word "труъ" aims to designate elitism and canonicity, not just precision of forms, but also... the authentic essence of any object, phenomenon or creative act, pretty much what "Istina" would be (See also: Istina). Thus the translator suggests to spell English "true" (and "truth") with an umlaut to achieve the same effect.
9. The original Russian phrase "В хуй себе позвони!" literally means "Call into your cock!" It's a vulgar dismissal that creates an anatomically impossible directive as a way of rejecting the threat. It's structurally similar to other Russian obscene rejections that use the same pattern of directing an action toward one's own genitalia as a

way of saying “I don’t care about your threat”.
10. Police number in Russia.

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Episode 8: about literary essays, time, happiness & unhappiness

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